

GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA  
**Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services**



Testimony of Vincent Schiraldi, Director  
Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services  
**BUDGET HEARING OF THE COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES FRIDAY,  
APRIL 22, 2005**

Chairman Fenty and members of the Committee, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify in today's budget hearing for the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS). At the last budget hearing, I outlined our goals to:

1. develop the nation's best continuum of care that is strength-based and family focused;
2. reduce the use of unnecessary secure confinement and out-of-home placements for nonviolent offenders;
3. maximize youth, family, community and staff input in our reform efforts;
4. increase interagency and community collaboration; and
5. create a "unit management" model that substantially improves conditions in our secure programs, similar to the nationally acclaimed programs currently being operated in Missouri.

I am pleased to report that DYRS' commitment to achieving these stated goals has resulted in initial positive outcomes for the youth that we serve, their families, and communities. First, the population at Oak Hill continues to decline based on a combination of vigorous step-down efforts and transfers to the Youth Services Center (YSC), the District's new pre-adjudication detention center located on Mt. Olivet Road. As of April 18, Oak Hill's population has declined to 159 from 245 on February 27 when I testified before you during my confirmation hearing. DYRS has not been able to reduce its population in secure custody to this size for years.

As part of our efforts to reduce the population, all of our detained girls were transferred out of Oak Hill's Unit 6 to YSC, leaving only five committed girls at Oak Hill until they could be placed. DYRS staff deserves high praise for the way the transfer was handled; having emotionally prepared the girls for what they knew would be a difficult transition. We have now successfully placed the five remaining girls and closed Unit 6, as part of our efforts to downsize Oak Hill. In addition to the transfer of the girls, on March 26, 20 boys were transferred from the Modular II unit in Oak Hill to YSC. This allowed us to close the decrepit Modular II, built as a "temporary" building in the early '90's. In taking these steps, DYRS has made significant progress in reducing Oak Hill's population and in meeting the requirements of the Jerry M Consent Decree.

With regard to maximizing youth and family input, I have convened a group of family members under the leadership of Jo Patterson from Parents Exchange, offered them free office space in the YSC and set up monthly meetings with them. Parents and youth have been involved in job interviews of my key staff, a parent traveled to Missouri during our most recent site visit there, parents and youth are on the committee to create the model unit at Oak Hill; parents and youth are in a decision-making capacity on a newly established work group to select “10 things to improve Oak Hill over the next 30 days.”

With regard to interagency collaboration, Marti Knisely from DMH, Brenda Donald Walker and I have met and have established monthly meetings to discuss ways our three organizations can collaborate. One suggestion by Marti Knisely to pool funding for the betterment of young people in our three systems is under serious consideration and Ms. Knisely is preparing an MOU for our review and discussion at the present time. In addition, I have had numerous meetings with Terri Odom, newly minted director of Court Social Services who was formerly YSA’s director of court and community programs. Her staff, my staff and DMH staff had a lengthy meeting at YSC recently to hammer out ways of working together, and Ms. Odom has moved forward on several promising initiatives to reduce waiting time for psychologicals and to set up community based programs for diverting non-serious youth from commitment/detention.

Finally, with in terms of creating our “model unit” at Oak Hill based on the Missouri model, DYRS and DMH staff and a parent of an Oak Hill youth traveled to Missouri in March to tour their system again and to begin negotiations around a contract for them to help train us on their approach. On Monday and Tuesday, 6 Missouri officials and a consultant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation will be on site for two days at Oak Hill to “go deep” on these discussions and begin to hammer out the exact details and begin to negotiate a contract. Families, youth, community groups and staff will all participate in this event.

While DYRS has made promising progress in improving the District’s juvenile justice system, an adequate budget will be necessary to fully reform the system and accomplish our goal of developing the nation’s best continuum of care for young people and their families in the District of Columbia. As you’re aware, because you understand this budget process a lot better than I do, the budget you see before you was largely prepared starting back in the fall, months before I arrived, and now sits before you largely unchanged from that time. I don’t think anyone could have anticipated the kinds of watershed changes we’re making in concert with the Council, back then, as well as anticipating all of the changes needed to make YSA an independent agency. As such, this budget clearly needs some modifying based on those new, largely hopeful, realities. I look forward to working with the committee over the coming month to

roll up our sleeves and make this budget one that will help move us closer to the model system we all want for the young people of the District of Columbia.